



Centro Bonó:

Advocating for Santo Domingo's Most Marginalized

No. 22

More than 1 million of Santo Domingo's 2,677,000 residents live in makeshift, mushrooming urban slums with high levels of poverty and limited access to public services. Since its establishment in 1962 by Dominican Jesuits, the nonprofit Centro Bonó has provided nonformal education and technical assistance to these citizens. Having won these communities' trust and the confidence of the Dominican public and private sectors, the Centro is now uniquely positioned to help Santo Domingo's poor participate more fully in Dominican economic and political life.

From 1994 to 1997, with an Inter-American Foundation (IAF) grant of \$99,550 (DR-270), the Centro supported the establishment and strengthening of neighborhood associations, or *juntas de vecinos*, in six Santo Domingo slums. In 1998, the IAF awarded the Centro another \$174,340 (DR-297) for further assistance to leaders from federations of these associations and from other unincorporated neighborhood groups. All are working together to define community needs and then to meet them through collaboration with local and national government, other NGOs, and each other.

With the second IAF grant, the Centro offered impoverished communities in and around Santo Domingo technical assistance, training, forums for discussion, information and funds toward preparing community development plans, accessing public and private resources, and managing these resources.

Over the course of this three-year project, the Centro achieved the following:

- * The Centro established a Community Development Resource Center, which approximately 15,000 students and community leaders already have consulted for information on topics such as social security, political reform, urban conflict, identity, youth, violence, poverty and eviction.

- * After fundraising training from the Centro, 83 community groups, 10 of which were women's groups, successfully applied to its Fund for Institutional Development for sup-



Courtesy of Centro Bonó

A representative of Centro Bonó teaches children about artistic expression.

port for 130 projects aimed at increasing community services. Some projects provided assistance to those most affected by Hurricane Georges; others allowed community leaders to attend relevant conferences. Upon project completion, the groups were required to submit accountings.

- * One of these 130 projects involved instigating a series of "Municipal Forums" covering topics such as strengthening civil society and decentralization. The forums promoted cooperation among the 1,600 leaders of 400 community organizations attending and led to the passage of a law ensuring greater community participation in municipal government.

- * Representatives from the 83 community groups as well as other community leaders and students attended 34 workshops on the environment (1,081 participants); business administration, planning and evaluation (1,198 participants); leadership (1,162 participants); and civic participation (303 participants).

- * Five communities drafted community development plans and negotiated with the national government for funding to implement them. Three of them conducted population surveys, and all five have improved local infrastructure.

* Leaders from neighborhood associations negotiated with private trash collection and energy companies to provide more efficient and less costly service.

* Three new federations of neighborhood associations were created.

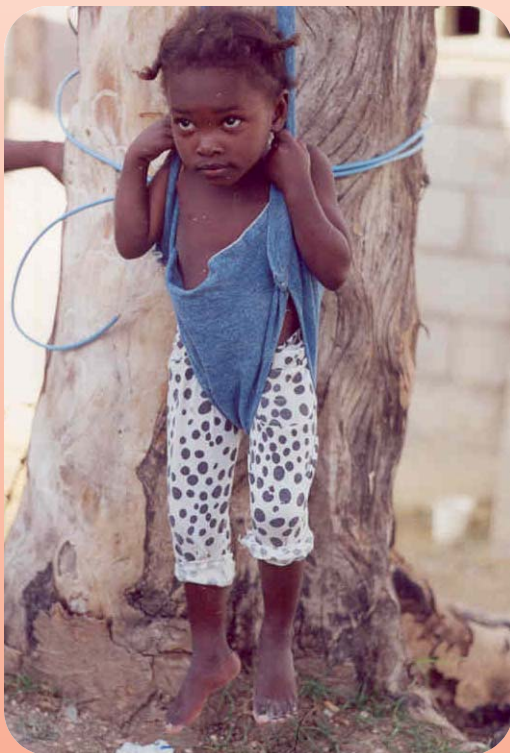
AN HONEST BROKER

The project faced several challenges. One neighborhood association was undermined by political differences. Many residents with whom the Centro works live with a constant sense of uncertainty and insecurity due to the violence in their neighborhoods and their fear of eviction. They are, therefore, unwilling or unable to focus on strengthening their communities and making them more stable.

Nonetheless, the Centro's 40 years of experience with marginalized populations has endeared it to residents of these communities. Their trust, combined with the Centro's ability to dialogue with representatives from all levels of Dominican government, has allowed the Centro to act as an honest broker between people and government, generating discussions about how to make the future more secure.

THE NEXT STEP

The Centro, which has relationships with several international donors, is now looking for ways to mobilize the Dominican private sector to support neighborhood development.



Courtesy of Centro Bonó



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Left: Using a tree as a scale, this little girl's weight is checked as part of a nutrition project. Above: A spokeswoman of four-neighborhood associations describes a proposal for improving community conditions to municipal authorities.

Data cited herein were compiled by Centro Bonó and independently verified.

For more information:

Inter-American Foundation

901 Stuart Street, 10th Floor

Arlington, Va 22203

phone: 703.306.4301

fax: 703.306.4365

e-mail: info@iaf.gov

www.iaf.gov

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